



Helga Grebing



THE HISTORY OF THE
GERMAN LABOUR
MOVEMENT

A Survey

With a chapter on Foreign Policy
by Mary Saran



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AUTHOR'S PREFACE TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

My purpose in writing this book was to present a comprehensive survey of the history of the German labour movement in its various manifestations in the general context of social and political development. In order to indicate the kind of information which the reader may expect to find in this work, I shall briefly outline the most important historical phases whose political, sociological, economic, psychological and ideological aspects are later described in detail.

The change from a feudal agrarian system with its peasant and craft economy to the bourgeois epoch of industrial capitalism saw the initially very modest beginnings of the labour movement in Germany, together with the emergence of the first social theories which, in the middle of the nineteenth century, culminated in the works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.

The militant, class-conscious character of the German proletariat became pronounced only after 1870, when the social consequences of the foundation of the Empire made themselves felt; it was then that the revolutionary theories of Marx and Engels became widely accepted and that the German labour movement created the mighty organization which—though never realizing its full power-potential in Germany itself—dominated the Second International.

The revolution of 1918 remained, as far as the labour movement was concerned, incomplete: though it transformed the monarchic, authoritarian state into a democratic, parliamentary republic which offered incomparably greater scope to the labour movement, the ruling classes of the Empire continued to dominate the social and economic scene. The end of the war also brought with it the split between Socialists and Communists, which had long been smouldering in the labour movement and now became irreversible.

By accepting the Weimar Republic in principle as a basis for the realization of its social and political goals, the social-democratic movement became the implacable opponent of all

the radical groups whose aim was to replace parliamentary democracy by a dictatorship of the Right or the Left.

After 1945 the social-democratic labour movement gradually, and with many reversals, discarded its traditional revolutionary theory. In accordance with the changes in the social structure of the population in the Federal Republic the Social Democratic Party has changed from a closed party representing a specific class into a party seeking to appeal to and represent various sections of the population. The SPD's programme is based on ethical values and a belief in the pluralistic society. It is directed towards a socially progressive and liberal policy, identifying itself with the state and depending for its realization in the main on a pragmatic approach. As a result of this process of change in the party, the task of representing the specifically working-class interests outside parliament falls now predominantly to the trade unions.

During the checkered history of the labour movement set-backs, failures, mistakes and inadequacies have at times hampered and retarded—on occasions virtually frustrated—the realization of its objectives. Yet the movement has invariably shown itself strong enough to resume its tasks under changed circumstances.

The English edition of this book will, I hope, serve the same purpose as I had in mind when addressing the German reader: firstly, it may prove a useful introduction for those interested in history and politics who wish to learn something about the German labour movement before proceeding to a more detailed study of the subject; secondly, it may furnish material for those who are directly involved in politics and who may find in the development of the German labour movement a—positive or negative—yardstick for their own actions.

H.G.

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